

Agnieszka Izdebska  
Department of Theory of Literature  
University of Łódź

## Polish Novel in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century

This text is not a compendium of knowledge about Polish novel in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. It is rather a kind of brief guide not only through Polish novel, prose, literature but also through Polish culture of the 20<sup>th</sup> and the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. My intention is rather to point some phenomena, names, books, personalities – not to provide complete (whatever it means) history of Polish novel of that time.

The stress is put on two literary periods: the Interwar Years and the contemporary literature in this text. There are few reasons of that. First of all the Interwar Years were the most fruitful ones in Polish history and there were a lot of fabulous figures and texts worth mentioning. Moreover the roots of modern Polish culture, literature and novel itself can be traced in that period. Furthermore, the years after the World War I was the time of emerging of new states in Europe and establishing a new political *status quo*. So for many readers Polish culture and literature of those times could be easily compared with historical situations of their countries. As far as contemporary Polish literature is concerned, I just find it the most interesting for young foreign readers. I also write about Polish popular novels – fantasy literature and detective stories because this kind of reader might become interested.

\* \* \*

In the 20<sup>th</sup> century realistic novel formula as the only effective one was exhausted. Nobody believed any more that it is a transparent cognitive tool, which could give us the same knowledge about the outside world as scientific research does. Nobody shared an ambition of great creators of realistic novels (e.g. Honore Balzac, Stendhal, Gustav Falubert or Lev Tolstoy) to make it possible to depict an infinite world in a limited text (Izdebska & Szajnert, 2010). But despite the loss of this faith and changing conventions – the appearance of stream of consciousness, points of view and all disillusioning techniques – novel is still perceived as a medium of representation which can reflect human existential and social experiences. Nevertheless – novel is the literary genre which is seen (by Michail Bachtin for example) as the only alive one – among others which are only parts of literary archive. So taking all these elements into account, the history of Polish novel in the 20<sup>th</sup> century could be a useful lens to look through Polish culture.

### Literature of the Interwar Years (1918–1939)

What is absolutely crucial for Polish literature of the last two centuries, is the great impact of history on all literary phenomena. In the 20<sup>th</sup> century all dates used in periodization of that time belong to historical order.

In 1918 Poland regained independency, after over 120 years of partition. In the 20<sup>th</sup> century Polish literature came with two strong, contradict attitudes. On one hand there was still a very strong tradition of literature's moral and social mission (Kowalczykowa, 2004). This was a heritage of period of partition, when literature was one of those spheres which had to stand in for institutions of a state. It was a medium for preserving and developing national identity, "a spiritual manifestation of nation's existence" (Nasiłowska 2004, p. 230). Although contemporary issues of community life seem to be typical topics for publicist writing, in Polish tradition they were often embodied in fiction. But, as Kowalczykowa writes: "writers drew upon the novel, which imparted a wider temporal perspective to current problems, and also possessed more profound and longer-term persuasive force". (Kowalczykowa 2004, p. 204). The most prominent representative of this attitude towards literature and its menial tasks was *Stefan Żeromski*,

the author of most important political novel of that time, *Przedwiośnie* (*Early Spring*).

On the other hand most Polish writers felt tired and restricted of that public service in building up patriotism and national community. They needed artistic freedom – the more so the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century was a period of various vanguard movements, which underlined pure aesthetic attitude towards art. Partly from such a background the works of *Stanisław Ignacy Witkiewicz*, *Bruno Schulz* and *Witold Gombrowicz* came from. They used grotesque as main aesthetic convention. This aesthetic category juxtaposes heterogenic qualities like comedy and tragedy, horror and tomfoolery, hybrids which are semi-alive, semi-mechanic and mixture of what is high in hierarchy of culture with this what is low. The grotesque exposes corporality and sensuality. All these elements function in ambiguous balance. In the background of grotesque there is this hidden an outlook, in which the world appears as a place of an absurd, an anti-order and a carnival. This is the image of the reality which heads for a catastrophe and disorder. Grotesque, which drives from ancient times, is the form absolutely crucial for the 20<sup>th</sup> century art.

Novels by *Jarosław Iwaszkiewicz* and *Maria Dąbrowska* are, in a way, the comeback of realistic, epic tradition. Both authors use a model of realistic novel with a perfect awareness of literary achievements of James Joyce, Marcel Proust and William Faulkner. Apparently they know Thomas Mann works, with their ostentatious play with traditional novelistic conventions. *Zofia Nałkowska* and *Maria Kuncewiczowa* are perfect representatives of psychological prose in Polish literature of those decades. They also refer to the realistic model, but their works are more focused on fate of individuals rather than on epic background. In their most outstanding novels they present events from personal, partly changing, perspective.

The Second Republic of Poland, built from the ground up in circumstances of almost constant internal and external conflicts and in the shadow of economic difficulties (extremely strengthened by the Great Depression) lasted 20 years. However that period was absolutely extraordinary as far as cultural life is concerned. There were a lot of truly talented people with great expectations of changes in social reality and in art as well.

On 1<sup>st</sup> September 1939 German forces invaded Poland, on 17<sup>th</sup> September the Red Army attacked the country from the east. Many Polish writers were killed during the war, many emigrated and those who stayed had to accept a new order. After 1945 the country was reorganized and literature – as always – tried to cope with depicting that “new brave world”.

*Stefan Żeromski* (1863–1924) was a novelist and a playwright. He was called “the conscience of Polish literature” not only because his works embodied dreams of his generation – dreams about independency and regaining their own country. He also showed the latest Polish history – insurrection of 1863, uprising against Russian authority, drowned in blood – and more distant events, like Polish participation in Napoleon’s wars, as very complex from moral point of view. He used to say that he didn’t want to let “national wounds to skin over with scars of vileness”. He tried to present Polish past and the present not only to express Polish experiences of being martyrs or victims, but also to show responsibility of Poles as people who had or would have the power to shape their own fate (Gazda, 2008).

Żeromski published in 1924 one of his most famous (and the last one) novel entitled *Przedwiośnie* (*Early Spring*). The book depicts the history of the main hero – Cezary Baryka, who – after years abroad – comes back to Poland as the country of his ancestors. The country which his dying father describes as a modern state with glass, clean buildings and healthy, open people. Contrary to these idealistic descriptions Cezary finds Poland as poor, conservative and weak country. He discovers how powerful are differences between the rich and the poor, how many citizens are starving, and – first of all – that living in Poland seems to be living under a smoking volcano.

In *Przedwiośnie* Żeromski is trying to show people in charge and the whole society how dangerous is anger and annoyance of the young generation. He also points how powerful could be energy of the disappointed young people, who cannot find the goal to fight for. He is saying: if our generation doesn’t offer them any idea worthy to live for, the young could be grasped by the most dangerous ideology of that time: communism – with its hostile attitude towards the idea of national state and the hidden Russian/ soviet imperial desires. In that way the writer describes dilemmas

of the first years of the Polish Second Republic: how to establish political form of the new state and modernize the country at the same time?

After the break of 1989 many literary critics in Poland asked: “where is a new *Przedwiośnie*? Why don’t we have another important image of changes which are going on?” And – of course – there was no good answer to that question.

*Juliusz Kaden-Bandrowski* (1885–1944), the journalist and the novelist was frequently quoted by those, who tried to describe the whole experience of the first years of regained independency of Poland. Kaden-Bandrowski in his most famous novel *Generał Barcz* (*General Barcz*) writes about something what he calls “the joy of the liberated rubbish dump” – which is a very sarcastic remark on Polish illusions and disillusion of those times.

The novel *Generał Barcz* tells a story of a soldier, who is a charismatic leader and an ambitious politician at the same time. He seizes the power in a Polish chaotic reality of fresh independence. The writer shows how social desires for strong authority could become the truth, but the illusions might quickly turn into dictatorship.

*Generał Barcz* is a *roman à clef* (a novel with a key), which means that it refers to the authentic events and creates the characters who may be identified as real people – well known politicians and public persons. When Kaden-Bandrowski was writing the novel he obviously had in his mind the most popular and powerful figure of that time – the marshal Józef Piłsudski – seen as the creator of the state in those years.

*Stanisław Ignacy Witkiewicz* (1885–1939), the playwright, painter, philosopher, photographer and novelist was one of the most eccentric figures of that time. He called himself *Witkacy* – from the beginning of his surname and the end of the middle name. His father, who was a talented painter and a creator of a so called Zakopane style (Zakopane is the main town of the Tatra mountains region) had a huge influence on his education. Witkacy was brought up to be a genius and he received extended home schooling. He was an extremely colorful and artistic soul and a person who frequently provoked social scandals.

He is the author of several novels, but he is most appreciated for his plays: *Szewcy* (*Shoemakers*), *W małym dworku* (*Country House*), *Matka*

(*Mother*) and *Wariat i zakonnica* (*A Madman and a Nun*). His novels – *Nienasylenie* (*Insatiability*) and *Pożegnanie jesieni* (*Farewell to Autumn*) – show the world of European civilization as full of chaos, decadent sorrow and fear of approaching catastrophe. That is why Witkacy decided to kill himself (he committed a suicide on 18<sup>th</sup> of September 1939, when the Soviet troupes invaded Poland) – he realized that his nightmares came true – barbarians from the East invaded the world he knew and they would destroy it irreversibly.

Most of Witkacy's works were published after his death and two decades later he became one of the most famous Polish writers in the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

*Bruno Schulz* (1892–1942) was a writer, painter, talented illustrator and graphic artist. He was a Polish Jew who wrote in Polish, loved German literature and lived in Drohobycz, a town with multicultural atmosphere: a mixture of Polish, Jewish and Ukrainian influences. He studied in Lvov and Vienna and then worked as a teacher in a few schools in Drohobycz. He was a friend of Zofia Nałkowska and Witkacy. He illustrated the first edition of *Ferdynand* by Witold Gombrowicz. The literary links reveal the real position of that modest teacher of a provincial town in Polish culture in those times.

His collections of short stories – which could be classified as novels of very loose construction as well – are frequently compared to Kafka's works. In his two books pieces – *Sklepy cynamonowe* (*The Cinnamon Shops*) and *Sanatorium pod Klepsydrą* (*Sanatorium Under the Sign of the Hourglass*) – he created a very characteristic dreamlike world made of elements of small provincial town reality, obsessions of the story teller and a fantastic history of Schulz's family itself. In fact the real hero of the two works is language – with its eccentric sequences of metaphors, which perform diverse functions – for example they may create inanimate objects as living creatures and present people as animals.

In 1973 Wojciech Hass, a famous Polish film director, made adaptation of *Sanatorium pod Klepsydrą*. The film won the Jury Prize at the 1973 Cannes Film Festival.

Schulz was killed by a German Nazi officer in Drohobycz ghetto. He was shot in revenge, because another officer – Schulz "protector" for whom

he made paintings on the walls at his home – had killed the murderer's Jew (they called them “my Jew”, “your Jew” to express their positions as just objects) before.

*Maria Dąbrowska* (1889–1965) was a novelist, essayist and the author of intimate diaries. She was a well educated woman (she studied sociology, philosophy and natural sciences in Switzerland), close to the left wing ideology. She lived as a modern, independent woman – for years, after her husband's death she was in an informal, open relationship with another man and – during the last years of her life – in close friendship (it might have been something more) with another woman.

Her most famous novel is *Noce i dnie* (*Nights and Days*) published in four volumes in 1932–1934. The novel is an example of genre relatively rare in Polish literature of the 20<sup>th</sup> century: realistic, epic novel. This is the story of Barbara, Bogumił and their children – alike the history of intelligentsia as a new powerful class in Polish culture. It is a colourful, vivid and rich image of Polish society between 1894–1914. The book is written in the convention of saga novel, very popular in European literature of those days (e.g. *The Buddenbrooks* (*Buddenbrooks – Verfall einer Familie*) by Thomas Mann or *The Forsyth Saga* by John Galsworthy). The main protagonist of the novel, Barbara, is a perfectly sketched character – she is concerned with every day life and constantly frustrated, but at the time of real danger she is able to focus on resolving problems and surviving in difficult reality.

The novel was adapted in 1975. The film directed by Jerzy Antczak became one of the most popular and loved movie in the 70's in Poland. The cinematographic version was a condensation of the 12 part award winning TV serial of the same title.

*Zofia Nałkowska* (1884–1954) is an outstanding novelist and playwright. She is considered to be one of the most distinguished writers of psychological prose in Polish literature. She is also the author of fascinating diaries, which are a valuable source of knowledge on Polish cultural life of those days.

Her best novel is *Granica* (*A Boundary Line*) – the story of a young idealistic man, who realizes at one, crucial moment of his life that he has

become such a conformist and dishonest man as his father whom he disdains. The author asks a few important moral questions concerning the boundary line beyond which our small decisions shape our entire life. This is also the story about the boundary lines in every society – very clear and impassable at the same time. *Granica* had two film versions – one made in 1938 by Józef Lejtes, the second one – directed by Jan Rybkowski in 1977.

Nałkowska's most famous book is the collection of eight short stories – *Medaliony* (*Medallions*) – published shortly after the Second World War. The book is the result of the author's work for the committee investigating Nazi crimes in Poland. Nałkowska learnt many stories told by victims and bystanders of the Holocaust and other war crimes and created that harrowing, severe, documentary like prose to give a voice to the survivors.

*Maria Kuncewiczowa* (1895–1989) was a novelist, who before 1939 had worked as a teacher. After the outbreak of the war she emigrated to France, the United Kingdom and after that to the USA. Then she came back to Poland and lived in a small provincial town.

Her most popular and highly prized novel is *Cudzoziemka* (*The Stranger*) published in 1935. The novel is composed of memories, digressions, and flashbacks of the main character – Rose and the plot focuses on the last day of her life. Rose grew up in Russia, in a family of Polish emigrants. She has always been a stranger for Poles in Poland and for Russians in Russia. Her accent has always been odd and she has behaved differently. She is an unfulfilled violinist – and on the day of her death she realizes why she has never been able to play Brahms concerto properly – she has had no love within her heart, only grief and fury. Finally she finds redemption for herself and peace.

The above mentioned works by Dąbrowska, Nałkowska and Kuncewiczowa were an attempt to shatter the stereotype of the traditional model of Polish Mother: quiet, modest and selfless. They describe how their protagonists cope with social pressure and make efforts to build their lives independently.

*Witold Gombrowicz* (1904–1969), a novelist and a playwright, is also the author of one of the most famous diaries in Polish literature. Just before the World War II he took part in voyage of the Polish cruise liner to South



America and then he decided to stay in Buenos Aires. He lived there till 1963, sometimes in poverty. In the 60's he became recognized worldwide and his works were translated into many languages. He died in France.

The most popular Gombrowicz's novel is *Ferdydurke* (the word does not mean anything in Polish). This grotesque story is about a writer in his early thirties, who is back at the secondary school and once more has to suffer from the pains of maturation. The main subject of the novel is the creation of identity in interactions with others. This is also a very ironic image of Polish society divided between "modernity" and "tradition" but still functioning within strong imposed class roles. The work ostensibly plays with the convention of traditional, realistic novel.

Gombrowicz is also the author of a few plays – *Iwona, księżniczka Burgunda* (*Ivona, Princess of Burgundia*), *Ślub* (*The Marriage*), *Operetka* (*Operetta*) and other novels – *Trans-Atlantyk*, *Pornografia* (*Pornography*), *Kosmos* (*Cosmos*).

*Dzienniki* (*Diaries*), which were published in episodes in "Kultura" between 1953–1969, according to many scholars is the most outstanding Gombrowicz's literary achievement. *Dzienniki* are not only the author's record of life but also a philosophical essay, polemics, collection of auto-reflection on folk poetry, views on politics, national culture, religion, world of tradition, present time, and many other important issues. At the same time, the author is able to write about the most important topics in the form of an ostensibly casual anecdote and to use the whole range of literary devices.

Undoubtedly Gombrowicz is one of the most influential Polish writer in the whole 20<sup>th</sup> century – many writers after him will write "with Gombrowicz", talk "with Gombrowicz" and think "with Gombrowicz". In a way we should talk about Polish literature before and after him. The year 2004, the centenary of his birth, was declared the Year of Gombrowicz.

*Jarosław Iwaszkiewicz* (1894–1980) was a poet, playwright and novelist and obviously one of the most eminent Polish writers of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, but at the same time he was a controversial figure. He was criticized as a long-term political opportunist in the communist Poland – for years he was a chairman of Związek Literatów Polskich (The Union of Polish Writers). His role as a person who tried to manoeuvre between authoritarian

regime and writers' community which desperately needed freedom for creation, was seen as extremely ambiguous.

Iwaszkiewicz is well known for his two novels: *Śława i chwala* (*Glory and Vainglory*) – a saga depicting a panorama of life of Polish intelligentsia in years 1914–1947 and a historical one *Czerwone tarcze* (*Red Shields*), but he is mostly regarded for his short stories.

The most famous one – *Panny z Wilka* (*The Maidens of Wilko*) – is the story of Wiktor Ruben, a man in his forties, who is spending his holidays in the country manor house called Wilko. This is the place, where he used to be involved in numerous and complex erotic relationships with those “maidens of Wilko”. Now, after many years, he tries to understand himself from that distant past full of possibilities – all unfulfilled. And this is the visit during which he realizes that there is no way back to the past, but – and it makes the story really pessimistic – he also does not recognize that he is not able to take a risk and truly love somebody. The short story (alike the other one, *Brzezina* (*Birch Grove*)) was filmed by Andrzej Wajda.

Iwaszkiewicz, esteemed for his poetry and his short stories, was also the author of *Dzienniki* (*Diaries*) which were published in the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. They give us the picture of his complex personality (e.g. he was homosexual, but he was strongly related to his wife) living in very difficult times.

## Polish Novel between 1945–1989

The main factor crucial for understanding circumstances in which Polish literature of those years functioned is – once more – political situation. In 1945 Poland became an independent country but only formally – in fact it was a state run under powerful domination of the Soviet Union. It meant strong pressure of censorship and disappearance of certain literary topics as forbidden and potentially dangerous. Furthermore, the state was the only employer and publisher, which put artists in an awkward position – they were exposed not only to natural pressure of readers, but they were also depended on changing literary opinions of those in power. Moreover, after war experiences and at the beginning of the communist new order, some

writers decided to accede to those, who built this world of “social justice” and collaborated with them. Many of them felt quickly disappointed with the new order in which there were “equal and more equal”. *Jerzy Andrzejewski* is one of the writers who converted a few times.

The next important fact about the state of affairs within which Polish literature after 1945 was created was the experience of war and the Holocaust. The literature of the period tried to depict something which is undepictable. This is the subject not only brought up by Zofia Nałkowska mentioned above, but mainly by *Tadeusz Borowski*, an author of shocking Auschwitz short stories. They both belonged to the generation of literature of memory and testimony. The Polish writers of next generations will depict experiences of so called post-memory, in which memories are inherited in a way.

Reflection on the history, due to the strong sense of its importance for the Polish community, has always had an important place in Polish culture. In Poland at that time, there were a few writers who have developed an interesting model of the historical novel. The special attention should be directed to two writers: *Teodor Parnicki* and *Władysław Terlecki*. Especially the second one, writing about the painful for the Poles events of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, put again valid questions about the limits of a resistance against oppression of the stronger opponent and moral consequences of living in the shadow of the Russian / Soviet empire.

Two other relevant writers writing in that time, *Tadeusz Konwicki* and *Stanisław Lem* both have become something of the national institutions. The first one showed in his novels obsessions and fears of his contemporary countrymen. The second one in fact created a Polish *science-fiction* novel as a genre which can be a carrier of a serious intellectual reflection.

In the a new phenomenon called *samizdat* (the word from Russian) appeared in Poland. It was the practice of reproducing and distributing censored publications by individuals, who passed books and documents from reader to reader. At that time a number of books circulated around the country in this way. It meant that national literature which had had no chance to appear in publications because of censorship was finally available. It also allowed Polish readers to have contact with these foreign literary works that the authorities considered dangerous (for example works

by Soviet dissidents). Thus for Polish literary life it was the realm of relative freedom. Another important element that affects Polish literature and the flow of political thought, was cultural activities of Polish emigration in the West. Publishing house *Kultura* ("Culture") working near Paris played a special role and had a huge influence on literary life. It published books and the monthly literary journal ("Kultura"), which became a kind of national institution.

In 1989 the first in post-war Polish free elections ended the semi-independence of the country. They opened a new chapter in Polish history, but not necessarily a whole new period in the history of Polish literature.

*Tadeusz Borowski* (1922–1951) was a writer and a journalist, but not a novelist. He was the most eminent Polish writer who gave a thorough literary testimony of reality of concentration camps. He was a prisoner of Auschwitz in 1943–1945. His main work is a collection of short stories *Pożegnanie z Marią* (*Farwell to Maria*; published in English as *This Way to the Gas Chamber, Ladies and Gentlemen*). Borowski provides us with an image of people in a concentration camp which is entirely portrayed "from inside". There are no "outside" moral questions – the crucial issue is just to survive, nothing more. The point of view of the story teller is: if you give a piece of bread to another prisoner it is just a gesture of pure stupidity, because it means that your chance of survival reduces.

Some critics did not understand Borowski's message. They accused him of immorality and even more: of ignobility in Auschwitz. However his statement was absolutely simple: we can not judge people's behaviours in absolutely inhumane circumstances – there was no God, morality, humanity in traditional meanings of those words in concentration camps.

After the war Borowski got involved in political life of post-war Poland, he joined the Communist-controlled Polish Workers Party. He soon became completely disillusioned with the regime. His private life was also complex. He committed suicide at the age of 28, three days before his suicide his wife gave birth to their daughter.

*Jerzy Andrzejewski* (1909–1983) was born in Warsaw and studied Polish philology. At the beginning of his literary carrier Andrzejewski was related to catholic oriented literature. Between 1952 and 1957 he was

the member of the Sejm (Polish parliament). Then like many others he changed his attitude towards communist authorities and was involved in the activities of Polish opposition.

His most popular work is the political novel *Popiół i diament* (*Ashes and Diamonds*) published in 1948. This is the story of a soldier of Polish underground army, a young man who after the years of war wants to live and love, but political circumstances are brutal for him. He dies accidentally after obeying his last command – assassination of a communist activist. The novel was interpreted as an image of the lot of the whole generation of those who fought for freedom of Poland, but after the war they immediately were classified by the new communist authorities as political enemies and were killed or imprisoned. That tragedy could not be presented entirely in the novel because of the censorship – that is why *Popiół i diament* is seen as a kind of Andrzejewski's failure. In 1958 the novel was filmed by Andrzej Wajda and became his most famous and the most recognizable of his movies.

In two of his novels – *Ciemności kryją ziemię* (published in English as *Inquisitors*) and *Bramy raju* (*The Gates of Paradise*) – the writer sums up his own accession to communist ideology. In the second one mentioned above, he tells the story of Children's Crusade of 1212, but in fact this is not a historical novel at all. He uses a kind of mask to show how easy it is to exploit the faith of those who had no life experience and above all how complex people's motivations are. The novel consists of two sentences (it has 400000 words) – the second one sounds "I szli całą noc" ("And they marched all night"). The novel is a collection of several monologues of main characters, who reveal their worries to the monk, the only adult member of the crusade. But this is reader himself who is able to gain limited knowledge of deeds and explicate and hidden motivations of all protagonists. In the end of the novel we still cannot be sure what the truth and what the illusion is.

Andrzejewski's last novel, *Miazga* (*Pulp*) was published in 1979 as *samizdat*. Nasiłowska summarizes the novel: "The plot spun around preparations for the marriage and wedding reception of a prominent actor and the daughter of a party politician, which is meant to symbolical unit and assimilate the artistic world and the party *crème de la crème*" (Nasiłowska,

2004, p. 240). The title of the novel refers to open construction of the work itself (it is a kind of deconstruction of traditional structure of realistic novel with metatextual layer of writer's diary in which he reveals the impossibility of drawing coherent plot. But the title is a metaphor of Polish society of that time, society in the state of deep moral and intellectual chaos.

The biography of *Teodor Parnicki* (1908–1988) is a perfect material for a fascinating novel. He was born in Berlin in a Polish-Jewish family. Then the Parnickis moved to Moscow. In 1918, after his mother's death, Teodor joined the Cadet Corps in Omsk. During the Russian Revolution he got to Kharbin via Vladivostok and became a student of Polish gymnasium. While reading historical novels by *Henryk Sienkiewicz*, Parnicki decided to be a Polish writer. So he is a good example in Polish literature of a writer who functions in a multicultural society and chooses Polish language as a medium of creation for building somebody's identity.

The model of Parnicki's historical novel is extremely different from Walter Scott's one used by Sienkiewicz. In fact Parnicki's novels are a kind of complicated puzzles, riddles which might be resolved by attentive reader. History in his works is unstable, uncertain, plots are a subject of recipient's reconstruction rather than something which is given. His novels are an absolutely fascinating intellectual adventure for those who do not hesitate to take a risk of literary journey through a labyrinth, with no chance of finding the centre of it. Parnicki's late novels base their plots on alternative history and never create presented worlds in traditional terms – what are presented here is language and narratives themselves.

The major novels written by Parnicki are: *Srebrne orły* (*The Silver Eagles*), *Koniec "Zgody Narodów"* (*The End of "The Concorde of Nations"*), *Tylko Beatrix* (*Only Beatrice*), *Inne życie Kleopatry* (*Cleopatra's Other Life*). One of the main subjects developed in these works is the issue of identity of those who are called *half-breed* and who recognize themselves as people located between various cultures and languages, without stable community which could define them. In *Tylko Beatrix*, where the plot is set in the 14<sup>th</sup> century, Church offers the protagonist such an identity. But the affiliation and certainty of belonging to something has its price – he must resign other languages and possible identities: he becomes the man of

church and has to live in Latin only.

*Tadeusz Konwicki* (1926) is a writer, a film director, a screenwriter and author of over twenty novels. He was born on the territory of eastern Poland, which belongs to Lithuania now. During the war he was the soldier of Polish underground army there. Thus he represents that generation of the Poles, who think with nostalgia about the past – mythical Poland of multicultural identity.

But Konwicki's works – because he has been writing his novels for several decades – are also a perfect image of Polish illusions and disillusion of the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. One of his most popular novels (partly because it has been on compulsory reading list at schools since the 90's) is *Mata Apokalipsa* (*A Minor Apocalypse*). *Mata Apokalipsa* is set in a future Warsaw which is a ruined city with very clear traces of soviet domination (for example Polish flag (which consists of two colours – white and red) is almost entirely red – there is only narrow stripe of white). In such an apocalyptic space the protagonist learns that he has been chosen to be a burnt offering. The funeral pyre is to be built in the front of the Palace of Culture and Science (the tallest building in post-war Poland, a gift from the Soviet Union for the people of Poland; originally known as Joseph Stalin Palace of Culture and Science). The story is about a last day of a future martyr, who is loitering around phantasmagorical city, meeting people and preparing himself for the great final.

Major Konwicki's works are: *Sennik współczesny* (*The Dream Book of our Time*) *Kompleks polski* (*The Polish Complex*), *Bohiń* (*Bohin Manor*), *Wschody i zachody księżycy* (*Moonrise, Moonset*) and *Nowy Świat i okolice* (*New World Avenue and Vicinity*).

*Władysław Terlecki* (1932–1999) is considered to be one of the most eminent – along with Parnicki – creators of Polish modern historical novel. He was a journalist and a writer who belonged to the generation which made their debut after the political changes in 1956.

The plots of his novels and historical short stories often concentrate on events of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, especially related to insurrection of 1863. It was the last Polish uprising in that century and spectacular, heroic disaster. This catastrophe changed attitude towards methods of regaining

independency of the whole generation of Poles. This partisan war was also full of episodes of heroism, cowardice, treachery and fratricidal fights against political opponents.

When Terlecki tells the stories from that period, he almost always sets his protagonists in closed spaces, they are often sick, tired and put through oppression (e.g. an interrogation). In Terlecki's works we do not find battles or spectacular historical events. History he presents is a sphere of personal, moral choices, loneliness and fear of infidelity. His protagonists always have to make a choice and to decide where the boundary line between political pragmatism and national treachery is.

One of the most outstanding Terlecki's novels is *Spisek* (*Conspiracy*) – the story about a young leader of insurrection of 1863, Stefan Bobrowski, who is travelling by train to fight a duel, which he could not cancel. During this trip he realizes that he is heading for a trap: he will be killed in this duel arranged by his political opponents – he is short-sighted so has no chance to take a hit. The readers of the novel knows historical events very well and they are sure what the end of the story is. *Spisek* is narrated in the convention of internal monologue of the protagonist (typical for all Terlecki's works). Thus we observe events from his perspective – for him history is the presence, with all its unfulfilled opportunities.

Another Terlecki's novel, worth mentioning here, is *Drabina Jakubowa* (*Jacob's Ladder*) which is a narration of a journey around Russia at the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century. The main protagonist is a dwarf attended upon his employer, a Polish count, who has a secret mission to deliver letter from the king of Poland to Catherine the Great. The novel told in the convention of philosophical fiction, typical for the early European novel of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, is also a parabolic image of Polish fears of its great neighbour. In the end of the plot the Polish dwarf is absorbed by the monstrous tsarina.

*Stanisław Lem* (1921–2006) was not only the most famous representative of Polish science fiction literature, but he was prominent philosopher and essayist as well. In 1976 he was claimed to be the most popular science fiction writer in the world. His works have been translated into over 50 languages.

The main subject of his writing is the question of role of necessity and coincidence in history, biology, culture. Another one is the search for



definition of humanity which emerges when human beings are confronted with creatures which (who?) are not human: cyborgs, aliens. In his most popular novel, *Solaris*, for example, Lem tells the story of people living at an isolated research station over the planet Solaris, which occurs to be home of a strange form of life – a living ocean. In the end of the novel the main characters learn a lot about themselves, but still nothing about the ocean. That is because it is the kind of a mirror which reflects their desires, fears and dreams by reproducing phantoms of people who were crucial for their lives. Lem's thesis seems to be the following: something which is alien is alien completely and it is beyond our comprehension. The only phenomenon we can grasp in the confrontation of the emptiness of the outer space and other worlds is our own nature. He also raised the question of life itself – is the ocean from *Solaris* a living creature in the same way as the metal grains (swarms of insect-like) which attack the crew of the space cruiser in *Niezwyciężony* (*The Invincible*)? Are they “alive” in the same way in which we are? How can we communicate with pieces of metal which have only the memory how to connect to another piece?

Lem's works were written in realistic convention and in the sharp grotesque style as well. His novels have often been adapted into film – a famous version of *Solaris* was made in 2002 by Steven Soderbergh, with George Clooney in leading role.

## Literature after 1989

The situation in Poland after 1989 from political and economic point of view has changed dramatically. However it did not mean such a huge alteration in literature. Of course there has been a radical change in the way of activity of the publishing market and the role of media in building relationships between writers and their readers. However this political revolution did not produce a different form of a novel.

Moreover writers who debuted before 1989 continued the style in which they had written before. *Stefan Chwin* and *Paweł Huelle* try to recreate or create a local tradition of their “little homeland”, Gdańsk, a place of many cultures, influences, with a complicated history. In this ambiguous

place they put an effort to show the formation of a new identity, which is part of the newly defined Polishness (Czapliński & Lechciński & Szybowicz & Warkocki, 2003).

*Magdalena Tulli* and *Olga Tokarczuk* cultivate the model of novel that can be described as postmodern. Status of the world presented in it is fluid and the authors play games with the realistic fictional convention and methods of narration. However the writers are trying to go beyond the pure literary games realizing the impossibility to return to realistic conventions. Thus they both create texts which are representations of the surrounding reality.

Tulli is one of those Polish writers, who deal with a difficult experience of Jewish – Polish relationships, which lasted for a few centuries and now inevitably must be seen through the Holocaust. Other famous testimonies of living in emptiness left by the Jews are also written by *Hanna Krall*. She is telling us moving stories of victims and survivors in her semi-fictional, semi-documentary narratives.

And here comes a new generation of writers. *Michał Witkowski*, *Dorota Mastowska*, *Jacek Dehnel* and *Ignacy Karpowicz* who are doing very well in the world in which literature lost the status, which it had hold in Polish culture for at least two centuries. Literature in Poland in the 21<sup>st</sup> century – as in other European countries and outside Europe – is no longer the most important medium of social communication.

Contemporary Polish culture ennobles popular literature which is so characteristic worldwide. It is not only the impact of postmodern poetics, but also the effect of relieving Polish literature of social obligations which rested on it for the last two centuries. Hence the work of *Andrzej Sapkowski* and *Marek Krajewski* met not only with keen interest the readers of fantasy literature or crime novel, but are also appreciated by academic researchers and critics of literary press. This status of popular literature is a clear sign of the times. But it is also a significant change in the hierarchies existing in Polish culture so far. In contrast to the Czech literary tradition Polish novel of the 19<sup>th</sup> century almost eliminated those literary elements which have always been associated with so called “low culture”.

*Stefan Chwin* (1949) is a writer, a literary critic, a scholar and a professor of Gdańsk University. His most eminent novel is *Hanemann*. The plot of the work is located in postwar Gdańsk, former The Free City of Dan-

zing (a semi-autonomous city-state that existed between 1920 and 1939). The protagonist of the novel is a German citizen, who stays in Gdańsk after the war. This is the story about a city which lost its past or this past exists now only as a phantom, in fragments, semi blurred traces. Hanemann is a kind of an icon of that past, a figure who fascinates a young Pole, a story – teller, who becomes a new citizen of Gdańsk and in a way an heir of its history.

Chwin is one of those writers who tries to present one of the most painful and untold (because of political reasons) Polish experience of 20<sup>th</sup> century – the great migration of people who lost their homeland as the result of changing borders of Poland in 1945. Stefan Chwin, Paweł Huelle and Joanna Bator and Inga Iwasiów, re-write the past, show in post memory narrations events which were parts of lives of their parents and grandparents.

*Paweł Huelle* (1957) is a writer and a journalist. His most famous novel – adapted in 2000 by Wojciech Marczewski – is *Weiser Dawidek*. The novel is written in a well-known European literary convention of writing a novel which is impossible to write. The status of the main figure – Weiser Dawidek – is semi-mythological and semi-fantastic. He is a Jewish boy from the childhood of a story teller; Dawidek is omnipotent, the leader of the group, who is able to invent fascinating games. When he suddenly disappears, adults start an time-consuming investigation. But nothing is revealed and the whole disappearance is mysterious.

The story teller writes his unwritable novel after years and he is still looking for Weiser. He expects him to emerge from the tunnel in which he disappeared in the past. He is searching not only for Weiser (who seems to him somebody different now than he was in the past), but also for his childhood and memories of that particular summer full of weird signs and enormous, odd heath, when he saw the young Jew for the last time. The main question stated in the book is: what really happened that summer?

Critics interpreted Weiser Dawidek as the figure of the Other, a mystic image of divinity itself. They also agree that Huelle's novel is anti initiation novel, the story of impossible arcadia of childhood.

*Weiser Dawidek* refers clearly to Günter Grass' novel *Cat and Mouse* (*Katz und Maus*). Another one – *Castorp* – to the famous novel by Thomas Mann – *The Magic Mountain* (*Der Zauberberg*). It is a kind of a prequel

of Mann's novel, it tells the story of Castorp's visit in Sopot (former Zoppot) before he goes to Davos, his *magic mountain*. Those games with great European literature reveal – paradoxically – the great creativity of Huelle's imagination.

*Magdalena Tulli* (1955) is a writer and translator (e.g. Calvino's and Proust's works). She is also, with Sergiusz Kowalski, the co-author of work *Zamiast procesu: raport o mowie nienawiści* (*Instead of Trial: a Rapport on the Language of Hatred*) (2003), a book on the language used by the Polish right wing press.

She wrote several novels: *Sny i kamienie* (*Dreams and Stones*), *W czerwieni* (*In Red*), *Tryby* (*The Moving Parts*), *Skaza* (*Blemish*) and a collection of short stories, *Włoskie szpilki* (*Italian High Heels*). Her works are not based on building plots – they are rather constructions exposing its linguistic nature, emphasized its literary status. However at the same time her novel *Skaza* (*Blemish*) and mentioned above collection of short stories are narrations typical for something what is called post memory and posttraumatic experience. It is not only related to descendants of Shoah victims and their post Holocaust Jewish identity. It's related to those, who are haunted by traumatic events of the others' past. That historical experience is crucial for Polish culture of the last decades, because here, in Poland "the final solution" took place and millions of Jews, Polish citizens died in concentration camps.

*Skaza* is – after all – the story about arrival of refugees on a square of a small town. Their presence seems to be scandalous for citizens. The newcomers camp on the lawn in the centre of the town, they are satisfying their physiological needs around the flowerbed, they demand food and water, a woman starts to deliver a baby. Instantly they become dirty, and their tidy and elegant clothes begin to look like rags – all these factors make indigenous people see them as barbarians. That, what is immediately recognized as fundamental feature of newcomers is their strangeness – "strangeness sealed up in itself".

The novel is a tale showing mechanisms facilitated any final solutions: from fear and overt aggression, through stigmatization, ending on strategy of justification of stigma and approval of elimination of the strangers, no matter the methods.

Tulli herself really belongs to the authentic “second generation” and a collection of short stories entitled *Włoskie szpilki* (*Italian Height Heels*), describes directly the experience of being the daughter of the Holocaust survivor.

*Olga Tokarczuk* (1962) studied psychology. She is one of the most popular Polish female writers and she also belongs to the group of the best-seller creators. Her novels are a perfect example of post modernistic writing mixed with elements of mythology and fantasy.

Tokarczuk's novels – *Podróż ludzi książki* (*The Journey of the Book-People*), *Prawiek i inne czasy* (*Primeval and the Other Times*), *Dom dzienny, dom nocny* (*House of Day, House of Night*) and *Bieguni* (*Runners*) are loose-fitting and fragmented constructions. Partly, the convention of those works are similar to magic realism (Czapliński & Śliwiński, 1999).

In her last novel – *Prowadź swój pług przez kości umarłych* (*Drive Your Plow Over the Bones of the Dead* – this is a quotation from Blake's verse) – Tokarczuk plays with the convention of detective story and it could be classified as eco-whodunit (whatever it means). The main character – a detective is an elderly woman, who is even more eccentric than her famous literary model – Miss Marple. When the plot unfolds, the reader might suspect for a while, that animals themselves murder people who offended them. Finally we find the solution in Agatha Christie style – like in her well – known novel *And Then There Were None*.

*Andrzej Sapkowski* (1948) born in Łódź, is the most popular fantasy writer in Poland. He created Geralt of Rivia, a protagonist of several novels and short stories. Geralt is a *wiedźmin* – a *witcher* (a warlock?), a mutant-assassin trained for killing monsters. Geralt, as a literary construction, is a mixture of different conventions of pop culture – from Tolkien's fantasy (Boromir and Aragorn) to Chandler's hardboiled fiction (Phillip Marlow). The Geralt saga consists of five volumes: *Krew elfów* (*Blood of Elves*), *Czas pogardy* (*Times of Contempt*), *Chrzest ognia* (*Baptism of Fire*), *Wieża jaskółki* (*The Swallow's Tower*) and *Pani Jeziora* (*The Lady of the Lake*). There are a lot of adaptations of Geralt's adventures into: films, video-games and role-playing games. His books have been translated into many languages, the English translation of *Krew elfów* (*Blood of Elves*) won the David Gemmell Legend Award in 2009.

To some degree, the presented world of Sapkowski's fantasy is Tolkien-like. But it is also the world in which – like in a mirror – a reader can easily recognize reflection of main issues of our contemporary civilization: e.g. hot conflicts in multicultural societies or changes in Earth ecosystems and narrowing down life spaces of some species. To some extent Sapkowski's books could be compared to Pratchett's ones.

Sapkowski is also the author of the Hussite Trilogy (*Narrentum, Boży wojownicy, Lux perpetua*), which conventionally is similar to an alternative history novel. He also wrote a book *Żmija* (*A Viper*) which is set in Afghanistan during the Soviet invasion.

Sapkowski's works belong, of course, to popular culture, but some of them are examples of the writer's ambition to transgress the limitation of pure entertainment.

*Marek Krajewski* (1966) is the most popular detective novels writer of his generation. He wrote several whodunits – among the others *Śmierć w Breslau* (*The Death in Breslau*), *Koniec świata w Breslau* (*The end of the World in Breslau*), *Festung Breslau* (*Breslau Fortress*) and *Widma w mieście Breslau* (*Phantoms in Breslau*) – which plots are set in pre-war Wrocław (Breslau in those times). The main character of the series is an policeman Eberhard Mock who carries out investigations into many harsh murders committed in the labyrinth of the town.

His novels are well constructed and they are a perfect realization of the convention. What is really interesting about the novels is the fact that within such a popular genre the author relates to one of the most painful experiences of the 20<sup>th</sup> century – migration. In a way Krajewski creates a fictional continuity of the place – Wrocław/ Breslau. This continuity does not exist any longer. Wrocław was a German city (Breslau) before the World War II. After 1945 it became a Polish city and it was reconstructed and rebuilt by Polish authorities. The restoration had a strong political and ideological background, because in the Middle Ages Slavic rulers shaped the history of the land. Thus the Communist propaganda had to create a complex historical truth to explain Polish presence in Breslau/ Wrocław. So Krajewski “invents” the past of the city in the same way he invented chief inspector Mock – they are both elements of completely literary reality

even if places the hero travels across exist on a map of the pre-war Breslau exclusively.

*Michał Witkowski* (1975) is a creator of Polish *queer* novel. He is also represents those young Polish writers who feel at ease in the world of mass media.

His most outstanding novel is *Lubiewo (Lovetown)*. On one hand this is a tale about Patricia and Lukrecja, two superannuated men, who called themselves *queers* and live in a small flat filled with souvenirs from times of communism in Poland. They are nostalgic of those years because they were young and the world around them was full of extremely masculine soviet soldiers who were lonely and far away from homes. For the protagonist of the novel it was the time, when they could be just faggots, not modern and emancipating gays. On the other hand the novel is an image of Michaśka (this is a female version of the author's name), called a woman of letters, who interviews Patricia and Lukrecja, because he is interested in history of being a gay in Poland. Michaśka is of course a play with portraying Witkowski himself, but ostentatiously that charming and witty piece also refers to convention of a novel in the first person.

Obviously *Lubiewo* – an embodiment of elements of mockery and pastiche – is a tribute to Gombrowicz and its very characteristic style. It is also a very clear reference to the famous Laclos' novel, *The Dangerous Liaisons (Les Liaisons dangereuses)* with Michaśka as a modern version of Marquise de Merteuil.

The next Witkowski's novel *Barbara Radziwiłłówna z Jaworzna Szczakowej* (Barbara Radziwiłłówna is the real figure from Polish history – she was a wife of Sigmund August, the king of Poland, the last ruler of the Jagiellonian dynasty; Jaworzno Szczakowa is a small town in the south of Poland) is a tale of a black market money changer who calls himself Barbara Radziwiłłówna, a heroine of a famous Polish romantic myth of great and tragic love. The protagonist of the novel (after a financial crash caused by change of the political and economic situation in Poland) sets out on pilgrimage to the sanctuary of Virgin Mary in Licheń. The third Witkowski's novel, *Drwal (The Wood-cutter)* tells the story about a writer called Michał Witkowski, who is writing his new text – a detective story.

The fame of *Lubiewo* as one of the most interesting Polish novels of the last few decades is definitely deserved.

*Ignacy Karłowicz* (1976) is the author of the novel, which is one of the greatest successes of the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The novel, published in 2010 *Balladyny i romanse* is a witty play not only of Polish Romantic literature, but also of Greek mythology. The title – *Balladyny and romances* – refers to *Ballady i romanse* (*Ballads and romances*), the first volume of poems written by the most famous Polish Romantic poet Adam Mickiewicz, while the drama of another poet of this period, Juliusz Słowacki, is entitled *Balladyna*. The author mixes cleverly not only easily recognizable titles but different characters, themes, threads characteristic for European culture as well. The success of the novel is significant because of the fact that both critics and readers unanimously appreciated it, which does not happen so often. The critics published rave reviews and the readers put it on the bestseller list.

*Jacek Dehnel* (1980) is a poet, novelist, translator, painter. He is the author of collections of short stories and several novels and interesting volumes of poems.

In his first novel, *Lala* (this is the name of protagonist used in her family circle), we can trace autobiographical elements. It is the narration about the life of the story teller's grandma. But it is also a funny, warm and at the same time tragic image of a young man, who is trying to attend upon his grandma's passing away. In his novel Dehnel gives a literary equivalent of an experience, which is familiar to most readers: nostalgia for places of our childhood which disappear before people or just with them.

Dehnel's next novel – *Balzakiana* – is an attempt to write a Balzac-like novel. The book consists of four mini-novels each of them, stylized on a particular novel by the great French realistic writer. Dehnel's book is a partly successful undertaking because it turned out that Balzac's model of realistic novel is not the best tool of describing reality nowadays.

The third Dehnel's novel, *Saturn. Czarne obrazy mężczyzn z rodu Goya* (*Saturn. The Black Images/ Paintings of the Men of the Goyas*) is constructed unconventionally. The text is a combination of monologues of Francisco, Javier and Mariano Goya (the famous Spanish artist, his son and



his grandson), reproductions of so called Goya's Black Paintings and short descriptions-narratives on the paintings themselves. In result we get here not only a very complex image of the famous artist and his relationships with relatives, but also a literary solution of mystery of the real authorship of the last Goya's works.

Dehnel is a talented young Polish writer, but some critics accuse him of being too "literary". Fortunately it seems that he has enough time to explore of his writing skills no matter how.

*Dorota Masłowska* (1983) is one of the best known figures of Polish contemporary culture. Her novel *Wojna polsko-ruska pod flagą białą-czerwoną* (English version *White and Red*, in American edition *Snow White and Russian Red*) was the most spectacular debut in entire Polish literature of the last decades. It was published in 2002 and immediately made its young, nineteen year old author a celebrity. The novel, written in colloquial language which might be seen vulgar at times, is the story of a hoodlum and – at the same time – an attempt of representing the protagonist's world in his way of speaking.

Her next works – novels (*Paw królowej* (*Queen's Peacock*) and *Kochanie, zabiłam nasze koty* (*Honey, I have Killed our Cats*) and plays (*Dwoje biednych Rumunów mówiących po polsku* (*A Couple of Poor, Polish-Speaking Romanians*) and *Między nami dobrze jest* (*It is Cool Between You and Me*) – are not only stories about Polish contemporary language (however many critics maintain Masłowska to have perfect pitch as far as contemporary Polish is concerned). They are also an attempt to portray the state of mind of the Poles at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, with their feeling of inferiority and being fixed on historical past.

Anna Nasiłowska wrote: "The Nobel Prizes in literature won by Polish poets are a telling indication of Polish poetry's high status. Polish prose is quite frequently believed to be of a lower caliber, yet it is in fact prose that shapes the way in the contemporary world is perceived, that depicts daily life, marks out problems and reacts to tensions". (Nasiłowska, 2004, p. 253)

There is no model of Polish novel – there are no special formal tricks which have been established in that tradition. There are no great Polish realistic novelists (apart from *Bolesław Prus*) in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. But

undoubtedly Polish writers have tried to depict local and to some extent unique Polish cultural experience – being between the West and the East, being a colonist and being colonized, belonging to a circle of the World War II victors and the defeated at the same time. This ambiguity, which could be observed on many levels of novels' constructions makes them really attractive to any foreign reader.